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The Politics of Identity, Ethnography and the Link between Academia and Society: An Interview with Claire Alexander*

By Carolina Ramírez and Carol Chan

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Abstract | In this conversation, Claire Alexander discusses the overlap between her social research and biographical trajectories, showing us how shifts in academic work are linked to broader transformations, in this case, linked to the politics of identity, ethnicity, and race in the United Kingdom. Alexander also tells us about the meaning and value of ethnographic work, including her experience of “revisiting” places and maintaining links with her research participants over time. Strongly influenced by Stuart Hall, Claire also talks about the importance of communicating ideas to and generating dialogues with those outside of academia. She reflects on her interdisciplinary academic collaborations and work with civil society organizations, and invites us to be committed to and engaged with our contexts and social transformation.

Keywords | Civil society; collaboration; ethnicity; ethnography; personal trajectories; race

Política de la identidad, etnografía y vinculación entre academia y sociedad: una entrevista con Claire Alexander

Resumen | En esta conversación, Claire Alexander aborda la imbricación entre trayectoria en investigación social y biográfica, y nos muestra, además, cómo giros en el trabajo académico se vinculan con transformaciones más amplias; en este caso, con las políticas de identidad, etnicidad y raza en el Reino Unido. Habla también del significado y del valor que tiene el trabajo etnográfico, a través de su experiencia de *revisitar* lugares y de mantener vínculos con sus participantes de investigación a lo largo del tiempo. Fuertemente influenciada por Stuart Hall, la profesora Alexander se refiere además a la importancia de comunicar ideas y generar diálogos fuera de la academia, de sus colaboraciones interdisciplinarias y con organizaciones de la sociedad civil, y nos invita a comprometernos con nuestros contextos y la transformación social.

Palabras clave | Colaboración; etnicidad; etnografía; raza; sociedad civil; trayectoria personal

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Política da identidade, etnografia e vinculação entre academia e sociedade: uma entrevista com Claire Alexander

Resumo | Nesta entrevista, Claire Alexander aborda a imbricação entre trajetória em pesquisa social e biográfica, mostrando-nos, além disso, como viradas no trabalho acadêmico são vinculadas com transformações mais amplas; nesse caso, com as políticas de identidade, etnicidade e raça no Reino Unido. Alexander nos fala também do significado e do valor que o trabalho etnográfico tem, por meio de sua experiência de “revisitar” lugares e de manter vínculos com seus participantes de pesquisa ao longo do tempo. Fortemente influenciada por Stuart Hall, a professora Alexander também trata da importância de comunicar ideias e gerar diálogos fora da academia, de suas colaborações interdisciplinares e com organizações da sociedade civil, e nos convida a um comprometimento com nossos contextos e com a transformação social.

Palavras-chave | Colaboração; etnicidade; etnografia; raça; sociedade civil; trajetória pessoal

Claire Alexander, DPhil in Social Anthropology from the University of Oxford, is professor at the Department of Sociology at University of Manchester and associate director of the Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity. Her main research interests include race, ethnicity, masculinities, and youth identities, as well as ethnography and oral history, with a focus on the United Kingdom and South Asia. Her recent work includes the study of the migration experiences of the Bengal diaspora and their dynamics of spatial reconfiguration in East London (Alexander 2011; 2013; 2018a; Alexander, Chatterji, and Jalais 2016). She has also notably conducted long-term research on the identities of South Asian and Muslim male youth in London. Claire has collaborated with diverse actors and civil society organizations regarding ethnic and racial inequality in the UK. Her AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) funded project, “History Matters: Creating Resources for a Diverse History Curriculum,” involved the creation of a platform to support teaching about migration in schools (www.ourmigrationstory.org). The website was awarded the Community Integration Award for research in 2017, the Royal Historical Society Public History Prize in 2018, and the Guardian University Research Impact Award in 2019.

Claire visited the city of Santiago, Chile, in 2019 to take part in the international network “Migration, Ethnicity, and Space: Critical Approaches from Ethnography” (MES Network, ANID/PCI REDI170315)¹ as an associate researcher. Apart from participating in academic seminars and workshops aimed at civil society, Claire participated in this interview in which she discussed her personal and research trajectory. Starting with how her interest in the topics of identity and ethnicity in the UK began, Claire told us about the connection between her biography and her research, as well as about how the shifts in her thematic interests occurred alongside broader transformations in the politics of identity, ethnicity, and race in the UK. As ethnography is her primary methodological approach, Claire also talked about what ethnographic work meant to her, especially in relation with her ongoing project “Re-visiting the Asian Gang.” This is a long-term research project (or rather, an ongoing one), in which 15 years later, she re-interviews the original participants in the ethnography “The Asian Gang” (2000), with whom she had remained in contact with for over 20 years. Strongly influenced by Stuart Hall, her postdoctoral research mentor, Claire also spoke about her commitment to communicate ideas outside of academia. This

1 The international network “Migration, Ethnicity, and Space: Critical Approaches from Ethnography” (MES Network), consists of Carolina Ramírez as the principal researcher (COES and FACS, Universidad de Chile), alongside two Chilean-based associate researchers Carol Chan (Universidad Academia de Humanismo Cristiano) and Carolina Stefoni (Universidad Mayor and COES), as well as international associate researchers Claire Alexander (University of Manchester), Caroline Knowles (Goldsmiths, University of London), Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (University of Southern California), Amanda Wise and Selvaraj Velayutham (Macquarie University). This interview took place the 1st of August 2019, in Santiago, Chile.

commitment has led her to generate diverse forms of interdisciplinary collaboration and initiatives that create dialogue with civil society organizations.

This interview left us with an important message regarding our role as social scientists, as well as regarding the challenges and opportunities that academics, researchers, and students should embrace in the face of our commitment to our contexts and social transformation.

Carolina Ramírez (CR): We would like to start this conversation by asking you about your personal trajectory. Tell us, how did you come to make migration, ethnicity, and race the nucleus of your work? How did this interest emerge?

Claire Alexander (CA): I came to sociology quite late. My academic background and my first degree was actually in English literature, partly because it was the subject I was best at in school and because I had a very encouraging teacher, who motivated me to go to university to study English. And when I studied English, I realized that I was more interested in people than in books... When I finished my degree, I wrote an essay on “black English,” about whether “black English” was a language or not. [That was how] I became interested in black identities around that time, partly because as a minority in the UK—a non-white visible minority—I had been interested in questions of race, ethnicity, and identity since I was a teenager. I grew up in the eighties as a teenager when there were lots of race riots and lots of discussions about whether you could be black and British... I am non-white and my family is white because I was adopted, so I was interested in those kinds of questions.

When I finished my English degree, I became interested in black youth identity, particularly because there was a music group called *Soul to Soul*, which was a very popular at the time and widely covered by the media. The front cover of a magazine asked, “Is this the face of black Britain?” I was kind of interested in the move from black people as troublemakers and not fitting in, to one where they were kind of seen as British for the first time and what that meant. So I decided I wanted to do a Ph.D. on the subject. I studied anthropology and then did my Ph.D. in anthropology, researching black identities in London (Alexander 1996). When I got my degree in anthropology, I realized that anthropology didn’t think that my work was anthropological... [because] I did my work “at home” (i.e.: UK) and anthropology didn’t consider that you should study groups “at home.” I ended up doing a postdoc at the British Academy on Asian Youth and then getting a job in a sociology department. So that’s my main starting point. From there, my main interests were race, youth, masculinity...

One of the things I was interested in with black youth was the difference between negative stereotypes of black youth and what that meant for people, and how they lived their lives in an everyday kind of way... how those stereotypes impacted them and how they challenged [the stereotypes]. Then, when I did the Asian youth project, I discovered that a lot of the same things that people were saying about black youth in the 1980s and 1990s were the same things as what they were saying in the 1990s about Asian young men as troublemakers, into crime, [having an] identity crisis... So I was interested in exploring what that meant. Not much work had been done on the topic. The work on Asian youth was—can I say this? —really boring. It was mainly about whether they had arranged marriages or not, and what I was interested in was finding a different [perspective]. Following this, I became interested in South Asia.

The boys I worked with on the Asian gang project were Bangladeshi, so a colleague of mine at the LSE (London School of Economics), Joya Chatterji, suggested that we do something on Bengali migration. The AHRC had a diaspora project. Joya Chatterji was a South Asian historian and she had done some work on the Bengali. We worked together on that project, which was more about migration than on race, although the two things are very linked. I was interested in the Bengali migration to the UK—mainly Bangladeshis, mainly Muslim.

This overlapped with my interest in the Asian gang project, who were British Bangladeshi Muslim young men. That was my starting point for the project that I'm doing which is the Brick Lane project, and the restaurant trade which grows out of that.

CR: And what are some shifts that you see in your work? You have examined race and masculinities, and later, diaspora. There seems to be a focus on space as well. Could you identify and tell us more about the shifts in your research trajectory?

CA: One of the shifts was from black to Asian young people. I avoided doing work on Asian young people for quite a long time, partly because I was a bit worried about whether I would be able to do the fieldwork, whether I would find anyone to talk to... While there were quite a lot of similarities, there were quite a lot of differences as well [between the groups]. Those [Asian] young people were younger, and I had to think more about questions of religion and family. The constraints on them were kind of harsh... The [black youth] group I did my Ph.D. work with were older and were working. They were more independent and slightly more autonomous. So there was a shift into focusing more on family, community... those kinds of identities.

But the shift from that to the Bengal diaspora project was probably bigger. Because the main thing I'm really interested in is race and inequality in the UK. Whereas shifting to the Bengal diaspora project meant shifting to a much bigger canvas and thinking about longer stories—the stories that the UK were part of, and how what happening elsewhere affected our identities, those identities when people came to the UK. And it was a different generation as well, because most of them were quite a lot older. So that was a big shift to looking more at migration than race as the main focus, and also in terms of discipline. My first two projects were ethnographic: I went and spent a year on the first project and five years on the second, hanging out with very small groups of people. When we did the Bengal diaspora project, I was working with a researcher. It was very much more geographically spread across the UK. I wasn't doing the work myself, which was quite difficult. I was also working with a historian, so I had to think about how things changed over time, which I hadn't really dealt with very much in my first two projects. So I was having a dialogue with someone of a different discipline, [and thinking about] how they thought about things was quite a big shift for me. It's made me think differently about how one integrates change over time into our questions about identity. Because people tend to think particularly about youth identities as being fixed, they focus on youth as if they didn't grow up. So I shifted to look at people's identities of place, not just in the immediate context but in terms of the broader context, broader histories. That was a big shift.

Carol Chan (CC): We would like to ask you a couple of more questions about this topic of race and identity. In a 2018 article, you wrote that “Increasingly, I think of [the current time] as the ‘Humpty Dumpty’ moment: that having successfully smashed the grand modernist narratives around race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality and so on, we are now left with the seemingly impossible task of putting the pieces back together. Of reconstruction, rather than deconstruction” (Alexander 2018b). Could you elaborate on this statement and how it relates to your current work and thinking on race, ethnicity, and identity in general?

CA: I was thinking very particularly about the British context. In Britain, when I was growing up, people talked about the current political blackness, where all non-white minorities would often support each other, so there was a much greater sense of solidarity. So what happened really from the mid-1980s onwards, was a fragmenting of their sense of identity, much more around ethnicity and culture. So black [identity] fragments into black and Asian, and black fragments into Caribbean or African, and Asian fragments into Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian. And then later into Muslim/non-Muslim [identities]. People [are] thinking about their identities in much narrower ways, more cantered on their sense of

self, without thinking about the context in which those identities are formed, the broader social political context, and what people have in common with other people. What you get are these groups that are all victims of kinds of discrimination and inequality, but [they are] looking across at other groups and not recognizing that they have things in common, considering the differences more than the similarities. I've always been quite resistant to that idea. It causes tensions between groups that should be thinking about coming together.

So you find this in the UK, particularly in discussions about the working class. People in recent years have talked about the white working class, whether it's a discrete group with its own identity. And what that does is it sets them up against other kinds of black or Asian or migrant working class, who share a lot of the same problems around poor schooling, poor housing, police, discrimination, etc. So for me, [we should be] trying to join those different identities... to get people to think creatively about the things they have in common, as well as the things that mark them out as different, and recognise that the fact that people are different doesn't necessarily mean you can't band together around particular issues.

I think it's really important for any kind of political change to recognise that people are in different positions to you, but to also be able to support them and their struggles, and hopefully they will then support you in your struggles. It sounds a bit naive but I think it's important for political change. In Britain, there is a lot of tension between black communities and Muslim communities. They have a lot in common in terms of where they live, where they're employed, and how they are discriminated against, police harassment, intervention, you know the Home Office... [But] they don't see those things as connected, and I think it's really important to see that the struggles that people have are part of the same struggle, which goes against the kind of broader racial state. I think that's my main argument.

CC: You just mentioned the idea of “political blackness” in the context of British blackness. Could you summarise this for readers unfamiliar with the context? It is interesting to think about this in conjunction with the thinking about blackness in the US and the way blackness is emerging in discussions about race and racism in Chile.

CA: Political blackness in Britain comes out of a very particular history, which is the history of colonization. What you get in the post-war period is mass migration from the Caribbean, and then slightly later South Asia, and then slightly later again, Africa. You get those people coming in, they're all described in the term at the time, which would be coloured people, which is not the same as people of colour. So coloured people, they all ended up working in similar kinds of areas of employment... The British state really doesn't want any of them to come, [so] they find it hard to get housing, [and face] quite a lot of police harassment. Political blackness comes out of the recognition of a definition against the broader white majority, in relation to the kind of shared experience and recognition of discrimination and struggles against that together. Very often there's a longer history to that, around the decolonial movement, where you've got Asian and African countries and the Caribbean joining together around certain decolonial struggles. So it's a recognition of that longer history as well. [These struggles] happen around education, around struggles against the police, struggles in housing. So [it's] a very policy-focused sense of identity, and that's where [political blackness] comes from. The idea mainly takes shape in the 1950s and 1960s, and in the 1960s and 1970s, it's at its peak. Particularly through the 1970s, when you start to get British-born or people who've grown up in Britain [children of racialized migrants], the problem is mainly associated with young people in schools, in the street being harassed by police, that kind of thing. You get the Asian youth movements, but also other forms of shared struggle, people trying to fight back against particular kinds of issues and supporting each other.

I think I have quite a romanticised view of what that time was like. People tell me it was always quite a fraught and difficult thing. Whose agenda was going to take shape in a particular moment would depend on what the dominant community was. So it was also a little bit fraught, but [there were] also activist identities, tackling racism and tackling discrimination across all people who were not white. Actually, there were some who were white, at various points the Irish would've been included, because they were also discriminated against and racialised in particular ways.

CC: Do you think that the idea of political blackness could work or would be relevant in another context? Because I don't think it emerged elsewhere.

CA: I think there was something quite specific in the ties [people had to] the British empire. When people arrived in the UK, they recognised that kind of shared history and experience. But the experience of discrimination was the same as well, then that starts to change when tensions between different communities started emerging. I think it's not seen in the same way in the United States, but you see it in some cultural form [with] black and Hispanic communities that become intermingled at various points. But in the current context, there's so much focus on specific identities built around culture and ethnicity that people find it harder to think about solidarity in those ways.

CC: In Chile, the emergence of "black bodies" is associated with very specific countries... [The discussion of race] boils down to nationality, where you're from. I think this idea is interesting and I wonder how that would play out here or elsewhere.

CA: Well Chile would be interesting, as I was saying about the US, [to think about] how to link across, say migrants and indigenous communities, who have similar but different problems, and how one is able to imagine and link and support across different and same agendas.

CC: You have also worked closely on new Muslim identities in the UK, particularly among the South Asian community. To what extent do religious and ethnic identities intersect in the UK context and how is this different as compared to the US, Australia, or other contexts where being a "Muslim" may evoke very specific images and stereotypes?

CA: Muslim identities in Britain have become much more complicated. In the early stage of migration—between the 1950s and 1970s—people came mainly from South Asia. Most Muslim communities are linked to South Asian communities: Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and quite a lot of Indian Muslims, though people don't talk about that as much. So [Muslim identities were] linked to ethnic or national identities. What's happened since the 1990s, I think, is that you've got a whole range of new groups coming through, who are also Muslim, but don't fit into that same ethnic box, and also don't have the same kind of history of colonialism, or the same kind of engagement with the British state. In more recent years, we have more people coming in from the Middle East, and with the wars, Syrian refugees [have arrived] who are also Muslim but not Muslim in the same way [as the others].

We did some work in schools with the Making Histories project (<http://www.makinghistories.org.uk/>). I was really surprised by the responses when we asked the kids where they were from, where their families were from. I still assumed that most of them would be of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi descent, and they weren't. They were from Iran, Iraq, Kurdistan, Turkey, Syria, Morocco... Everywhere. Runnymede Trust² did an interesting series on these smaller new migrant groups that we don't really know much about. In the UK, some of them

2 For more information on the organization, visit: <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/>

have come on the radar partly because of the link through terrorism—the Manchester bombings were by a local Libyan, and we don’t know anything about Libyans in the UK, because the academic world hasn’t quite kept up with the changing demographics. And I think that causes quite interesting tensions and academic questions about how we understand those groups. The last census had religion as a category, and included “Arab” as a category for the first time. Religion, partly because people were interested in where the Muslims were, and then [the inclusion of Arab] was a recognition that those Muslim populations are much more diverse than they used to be. The Bangladeshis and the Pakistanis are still the largest group [of Muslims] but you can no longer map [Muslim identity] to South Asian groups in the way you could fifteen years ago.

The “New Muslims” project (Alexander, Radcliff and Hussain 2013) was about two things: partly about recognising that there were new groups coming in, but also that those older Muslim identities were changing dramatically. [There are] generational shifts over what it means to be a Muslim in the UK, even in those classic Bangladeshi Pakistani communities. [Muslim identity] has really changed and [the younger generation] are engaging in quite different ways with what religious identity is globally, particularly through the use of social media. I have a Ph.D. student doing work on modern Muslims in Birmingham and they’re engaging in a global set of networks in quite different ways to how their parents would’ve done. [The project] is partly trying to capture that shift with these new groups.

CC: When you say global, do you mean a Muslim identity that is global rather than one that is rooted in a specific culture?

CA: Yes, so what people say is that generationally, at least for the Bangladeshi (a group I know best), the new generation is leaving behind Bangladeshi Muslim identities because they say it’s not a “proper” Muslim identity. They’re engaging in more Middle Eastern identities and “going back” to discover what that actually means... They see their parents’ culture as being “mixed,” and this is causing interesting challenges around arranged marriage. Muslim women are telling their parents, “That’s not Islamic, that’s actually a Bangladeshi thing and I don’t want that.” Or “I can be educated, because it says this in the Koran.” So [these new developments] have both positive and negative consequences because [young people] also engage in those more fundamentalist views of Islam which can lead to quite a closed and puritanical view of what identity is. But I think there’s quite a lot of interesting dialogue around how you draw such boundaries.

CC: You mentioned two examples where young people can use these discourses to challenge more conservative tenants of their parents’ practices, but then you also mention that these young people may also impose their own conservative views.

CA: Yes, for example, things like Muslim girls wearing hijab. Even leaving aside the niqab and full coverings... Some of the people I spoke to on the Brick Lane project are quite left-wing... Now their daughters want to wear the hijab and they’re not happy with that. They feel it’s not part of what they want, but it’s part of what their daughters think is important for their sense of a Muslim identity, [one that is] not rooted necessarily in Bangladesh at all.

CC: My next question would be, especially in what you’re saying about the more complicated identities of the second or third generation, to what extent is the concept of “diaspora” still relevant, since it’s something you’ve also worked on?

CA: We did this project, the Bengal diaspora project. My sense of what diaspora was as a sociologist was very different from my colleague who was a historian and what her sense of diaspora was. For her, diaspora was very much focused on the place of origin, and, as a historian, she was interested in those moments of movements. As a sociologist, sociological diaspora has very often been used as a synonym of race and ethnicity and migration, so

it focuses very clearly on places of arrival. Bringing those two ends together was quite interesting. Sociological views of diaspora tend to be very present-focused as well, very much about the here-and-the-now and how you use that to claim a space for yourself in the place of arrival... It's about a sense of belonging and opening up a space in that kind of nation, certainly that's how it's been used in Britain by race scholars. What it's been less good at is thinking about the trajectory between those places of arrival and the places where people come from, what people carry with them. From working with a historian, [I've learnt] to think about how people don't spring fully formed out of nothing... People spring from places in which they're in but also places where they come from, or where their parents or grandparents are from, and those things change. So [diaspora] is about thinking about the place of origin, which is always changing, all the time, and the place of arrival, which is changing all the time, so it's a constant dialogue.

In the UK, you find that migration scholarship is separate from race scholarship. As a race scholar, my focus was on people brought up in the UK, and it has been a powerful learning process for me to recognise that you can only understand that when you understand the history of migration and the things that people carry with them. I'm thinking about, for example, the Asian gang group which I've been re-interviewing. Some of them don't have strong ties at all—very British focused—and some of them have very strong ties: they're married to people from Bangladesh, their parents have gone back, they own businesses in Bangladesh. And even the ones in the UK who are very British focused, they have a sense of familial and cultural ties, the expectations of who you marry will impact your family, [for example] does caste come into play or not? I think it's an interesting dialogue, you have to build a stronger sense of temporality.

CR: You mentioned that you re-interviewed people involved in your project “The Asian Gang” (2000). What has it been like to return to your informants after two decades? How have they changed, and with how many of them have you stayed in touch (or not)? What has remained the same? What were some of the challenges and highlights of this project, particularly reflecting on the broader political-economy and how racial and gender politics might have changed during this time?

CA: I did that original project in the mid-90s. The boys I was working with were between 14 and 17 years old, and I worked with them for five years, so when I was finishing [the project], they were finishing school, the ones I was mainly working with. At that point, they very strongly identified themselves as Bengali first, and then either Muslim second or British third, or British second and Muslim third. When I went back and did the project with them, I re-interviewed them about fifteen years after the first set of interviews. I interviewed nearly all of them again; only one said no, one I couldn't find, and one who was in Bangladesh. The others I interviewed, because I was curious about the choices that they have made. So [they are] nearly all in their 30s, nearly all married, nearly all working. Some of them are in prison, some of them had been in prison and were out of prison. So I was partly tracking a kind of transition into adulthood, what had happened in their personal lives in that time.

I think that I did the first interviews in the mid- to late-90s and then in 2012, when I did that second set of interviews. What obviously [happened in between] is the whole war on terror. So you start to get really interesting Muslim communities in the mid-90s, but this takes off massively after 2001 with the twin towers and then the riots in the UK which mainly [involved] Asian Muslims. So you get that really strong sense of Muslim identity and what that means. When I interviewed them all now and asked them what they thought about their identities, they all said [they identified as] Muslim first. They all denied they had ever said Bengali first, ever. They said “no, no, no.” We talked about how that sense of religion had changed. Now they're saying that at the time religion was really important. We didn't talk about it that much, but they were 15. But I think if it was important [then], it

was important in a different way. Now it's more public, at the front of their minds kind of way. So you've got that as one of the big shifts—the political and social context of being a Muslim in the UK is now massively different. When I did the Asian gang project, the first book couldn't get a publisher. One publisher told me that people were no longer interested in Asian youth, they're boring. [And] now suddenly everyone is interested in Muslim young people. But they're thinking of them as Muslim rather than Asian, which is telling.

At the same time, they're growing up, they have been through university, they got married, some of them have children. They have transitioned into adulthood at a time when their identities are really in the spotlight and the kinds of choices they have made about that. I worked with quite a small group in one area, [where they] mainly went to the same school or lived on the same estate. So you see where they are, fifteen, sixteen years later, and there's a massive divergence between people who had the same start. On one extreme, you've got a very successful lawyer who's opened his own firm in Canary Wharf and is doing all kinds of great stuff. And on the other end, you've got somebody who was in prison for twenty years because he was one of the biggest heroin dealers in East London. And you've got all those in the middle, some of whom got quite heavily into drug dealing at various points, or were drug addicts... [people who] really kind of failed socially. Then you've got the vast majority as bus drivers and, you know, just doing ordinary stuff. All this among people who are still in contact with each other, so it's interesting. They all know what each other is doing and they are all kind of still connected because of that place they all came from. So that's been interesting. I've been looking at who they married, as well as the kind of work they chose to do. How they've stayed friends with each other, given quite different choices. Some of them have fallen out, but even when they've fallen out, they still know what each other is doing, so they know who's married, who has children... Maybe it's because they have Whatsapp or Facebook groups, but they keep tabs on each other, and they still care about each other, even if they've fallen out or gone in quite different directions. That causes tensions, of course. What do you do if you're a successful lawyer and one of your closest friends has been in prison for twenty years for being a drug dealer? How do you negotiate these ties from when you're 15 with the adult you are at 35, when they could do you quite serious damage?

I've been in contact with two groups of brothers; they're families, so that's how I know what they've been up to. I'd see them at weddings, and that kind of stuff. It's harder now that I've moved to Manchester, but there are two families that have become very important to me, that I've become close to. I know their sisters and nieces and you know, there's a point in which the ethnography just becomes your life. You stop doing ethnographic work and they're part of your life and the people you care about. And then when you decide that you're going to do a study, and suddenly they become research subjects again, that's really difficult. I don't know what I'm going to do with that. Because there's a lot of stuff that I know about them and their families and I don't know if I can use [some of] that material that I know about, that they told me ten years ago... things that they didn't necessarily tell me on tape. So I'm not sure. I'm going to have to let them read it and let them see what they think. But often it's also about stuff I know that they don't know about each other... It is an interesting methodological question. I'm also thinking about how my relationship with them has changed over that period. It turns out that I didn't know a lot of stuff about them when they were fifteen, things they never told me... So I'm revisiting some of that stuff and thinking about what I'd missed the first time around.

CR: Just as they have changed, your way of looking at it might have changed also.

CA: [This time] I've got to know their families well too; I didn't have a sense of that when I was doing the project the first time around (in the 1990s). I would've given more time to the spatial aspect. I went to visit one of the boys. He had bought a flat where this all originally started. So I went to visit him in his flat and I realised for the first time how surveyed that

space is. There is an inward-looking courtyard, and everyone can see everyone all the time. I realised what that would've been like as a 17-year-old boy being constantly watched by other people in your community the whole time. I re-interviewed this guy, and his wife had just left to go to college. I had started this interview and within ten minutes of my being there, there was a knock on the door, and it was some woman. She knew the wife had left and she wanted to check... And it really gave me a sense of how constrained their lives were, and still are, to some extent.

CR: Continuing from this idea, how have you come to think about the value and challenges of long term ethnographic research?

CA: As an ethnographer, I think it's one of the most valuable kinds of research you can do, because I think it's about presenting people as people. [Ethnography is about] understanding what motivates people, how they fit together, how they work together, and you can really only do that very close up. These personal relationships—if you can build them—will be incredibly rewarding but also tricky to negotiate. I think I've been incredibly fortunate to have access to the lives of these young men and their families for twenty years. It's completely shaped my sense of who I am and what I do. I think it gives you really intimate insights. And doing it over time... When people do work on youths, [they tend to] assume a group that kind of remains the same. Of course, when you're tracing someone from the age of 15 to the age of 32 or 35, they're no longer youth, and there's something about that growing up. One of the things people talk about in relation to night crime and gangs in the UK is the idea that you never get out of that life; you remain stuck in it. When you look at what happens in that period, leaving school at 16 to 20-21, you're in a different place. I think that often the way in which young people, particularly non-white young people, are demonized challenges some of the ways and assumptions you can make about what people do with their life. You can't always tell where that's going to go. Seeing people grow up and seeing the way that they thought their lives were going to be at 15—even the way I thought their lives were going to be at 15—and then the choices they actually made or the things that happened along the way to push them into different directions, is really startling. Really surprising, and you get a sense of the textures and choices.

One of the things that I'm interested in for the book is related to work. For them, there's a slippage between legal and illegal work. Various of them have done quite precarious work, working in kind of McDonald's or maybe the restaurant trade for a while, and they've slipped in and out of drugs and stopped, and seeing that kind of trajectory and how that is negotiated over time is quite interesting, because it's complicated. [It's the] same with the choices they made around marriage. Who they married, for some of them, bore very little resemblance to who they thought they were going to marry or the choices they thought they would have made at 15 or 16. And the reasons why that has happened [has to do with] their approaches to religion... If they became very religious, often they've had different pathways into that.

There are three of the boys that I know who are very close and have remained close. Two of them are quite religious and one of them came to it through his family connections, and the fact that his father died, [he wanted] to understand what that meant for him. One of them came to it through a much more political trajectory around political Islam and is very involved in political organisations. The other one worked in a betting shop and was not very religious, but has tried to be a better Muslim... Watching how those friendships have been maintained and the kind of spaces they create to continue their friendships have been quite interesting. There's a kind of intimacy about ethnography that no other research really gives you. It gives you a texture you don't get anywhere else.

CR: And now you're also working with historians, which is interesting. Could you tell us more about oral history as a method and your project on the Bengal diaspora that utilized this method to explore diaspora "from below"?

CA: The Bengal diaspora project was mainly getting people to talk about their lives. My colleague, the historian, she's very interested in the big picture and often that's quite impersonal. We were quite interested in getting personal narrative accounts of what that was like. So if you take a big thing like partition or the war of independence in Bangladesh: we know the facts and the broad shape of that, the policies, but how does that impact people and their lives? We were interested in getting the voices of people whose voices don't really get heard—the voices of women, poor people, refugees. People who were otherwise invisible, but who were shaped by history, and also active participants in shaping those histories in terms of their [migratory] movements, and the places they settled in, the new homes they made. We had researchers doing that work, who did it in the languages that people spoke in. It was interesting to be able to trace the personal biographies and relate those to documents and photographs. That bottom-up approach is very powerful because it allows you to give voice to marginalised groups that otherwise just don't appear. That's a main strength [of the method].

CC: You have also worked a lot with civil society actors or on public education efforts. Could you tell us about the process by which you started to work in projects that linked academia with civil society? For instance, how did the first instances of these collaborations start and what motivated you to establish those links?

CA: I come from a fairly non-traditional academic background; I was the first in my family to go to university. For me, academic work has always been about a form of communication. I'm not necessarily interested in ideas in and of themselves, I'm really interested in people and social change. And I think that's a personal thing. Growing up as a minority in society, you want to be able to change the society through the work that you do. I was heavily influenced by Stuart Hall who was my mentor for my postdoc. He was an amazing teacher and communicator, and for him, it was always about how you communicate ideas outside of academia. I was strongly influenced by that, and ethnography, the idea of telling stories and making the stories human and rich. So in some sense, I always wanted to look outside academia. I wasn't even always sure if I wanted to be an academic or what that meant. So that helped.

I mainly got involved with the Runnymede trust through a friend of mine who I met at the university. He used to run the Oxford Access Scheme as an undergraduate which was about more participation for BME (black, minority, and ethnic) people to go to Oxford. Very few British non-white people go to Oxford. He moved on and started working at Runnymede and asked me to join their trustees board, they needed academic personnel on that board. So I learnt a lot about how you communicate academic ideas to audiences that are not academic. And then, when we got the Bengal diaspora funding, we said that we would build a website for school children, and we realised we had no idea how to do that. So we worked with Runnymede on that. They put more time and effort into that website than we actually paid for. They had a massive amount of expertise in education, so we worked with them to turn the interviews we got into something that 13- or 14-year-olds could understand (<http://www.banglastories.org/>). The website is gorgeous, and we had tips on how to use it in school. We wanted to see what it's like to work in schools with it. We got the money to do that and worked in various schools, getting people to think about how specific stories of Bangladeshi migration were similar to their own family stories or community stories. It was interesting to think about how those ideas translated to see how you could build those stories into their own lives, to understand their sense of who they were and what they could do.

We worked with teachers too, and we worked on a website on how to support teachers (<http://www.makinghistories.org.uk/>). I've learnt a lot about how to translate and speak to different audiences in ways that make sense to them. Academia is a very particular language and often that needs to be interpreted to other people. It's all well to talk about how identities are complex and confusing and shifting, but when you're working in a context where people are being discriminated in schools or by the police, you have to think about how those things fit together and how you can use those to change the world around you. So that's important for me. Runnymede had connections that could lead to different kinds of opportunities and support.

I genuinely think if you're someone who's working with marginalised groups in whatever way, shape or form—migrants, racial ethnic minorities—you have to turn the work you're doing into something that can become an intervention, otherwise it's parasitic. It's unforgivable. You can't turn people's lives into ideas and theories. You have an obligation to do that work and give them something back. You can't just take and not want to give something back. For me, communication beyond academia is one of the things that is important to me. One of the things I'm proudest of is related to my first project on the Asian gang. Some of the boys I was working with were doing A level sociology. They used to ask me whether I thought that I would ever be [on the required reading text]. A few years after the Asian gang book had come out, it was, and so they were really excited and delighted.

Sometimes, when I go to talk in schools where they have read "The Art of Being Black" (1996) or "The Asian Gang" (2000), you could see these ethnic minority kids [think], "She wrote that, she looks kind of ordinary, I could do that... I could go to university, I could maybe do some research, I could do better research than her." I once talked to some kids about the Asian gang project and someone said to the teacher, "But I can do that better than she did." And I thought, that's the best thing, that you can get some young person to read and either say, "I recognise myself in that," or that "I can do better than that." "If she can do that, I can do that..." Even in my most cynical moments, it's one of the things I strongly believe in.

CC: What are some challenges and highlights of working in "civil society" research like what you have done with Runnymede, and working with people outside of academia?

CA: My experience has been largely with think tanks. Runnymede is a think tank, so they're very understanding of how academics work and what academic work is. One of the main challenges working with community groups is they don't understand what academics do and can be quite suspicious sometimes, often quite rightly, because they think you'll take from them and not give back. So I think [that] it is important to establish trust early on in those relationships, show that you're on the same page, that you care about the same things. That's one of the main challenges. Other factors are time and money. It can take a long time to build trust in these kinds of relationships and you have to make sure you're doing something productive. You don't want to do hit-and-run research where you do a focus group and disappear, and they never hear anything else again. So that takes a lot of time and academics underestimate the amount of time and money it can cost. So very often, certainly in the UK, academics think they can get an organisation to do something for them, and they don't think they might have to give them money, they don't think about the time and resources they're taking, or the fact they're basically buying connections and expertise. So I think it's important that that gets calculated properly so it's a benefit to the organisations you're working with; valuing their expertise and the connections that they bring. They're not for free, they haven't been built up for free and you need to recognise that.

One of the big challenges in terms of time is that academics in civil society groups work in very different ways, so sometimes working with Runnymede would drive me crazy. There would be long periods where it didn't look like anything was happening, then suddenly something has to be done in two weeks. That's quite stressful where you normally have a long time to write something and think about what you want to do, talking to people who understand what you're saying. [It is challenging] having to produce something to present to people who don't understand some basic things you want to say in a short time, under high pressure, or having to simplify what you want to say. Doing media work, for example, you can't have complicated discussions about the nuances of your research. You need a clear message. Those things are quite hard for academics. Similarly, civil society organisations often think academics are on a different planet and have no understanding of how the world works or the kinds of pressures they're under, having to juggle multiple projects, so I think that can be quite difficult.

CR: Our last question is: what advice do you have for young scholars who would like to engage in more work with civil society?

CA: [I would tell them to] recognise that it's difficult to balance the different demands on your time. Doing engagement and impact work will take away from other work that you're doing. [It will] take away time from writing, unless you want to just work all the hours that you have and you'll have a nervous breakdown. Don't do that. Recognising the time that it takes and recognising that therefore you're not going to publish at the same rate as you would normally do. That's ok. Often I think young scholars publish too much anyway. They could publish less and do something more interesting. In this climate there's more space for that kind of work—engagement work and media profiles. I think those people are recognised in a way that was not recognised (when I was starting out), and it wasn't valued. People assumed that if you were doing that kind of work, you weren't doing proper scholarly work. Now people recognise that impact and media work is very valuable, but they also assume it's something you do on top of your other work. I think institutions are starting to wake up to the fact that you can't do everything. In the UK at least, they got slightly better at recognising that. It's about balancing the kinds of different things you want to do.

It's also about humility, recognising that we are in an incredibly privileged position to do the kind of work we want to do, to have time to think and write, and actually enter into other peoples' lives and learn about other peoples' lives. It's important for academics to be aware of that privilege and to be humble about the relationship they have with people that are not in that position, who are not academics, and to respect that. That's really important. To be humble and prepared to give back in the kinds of work we're doing. If you're not prepared to give back, you shouldn't be doing the work. If you're doing work on migration or race or ethnicity, there's a reason and there's a passion that brings you to the project in the first place, and that's what you should hold on to.

And you often forget that, you get bogged down in administrative work or teaching or other stuff that gets in the way, but ultimately there's something that brings you to that work, which is the desire to change the world around you, and understand and change it. Holding on to that kind of passion and commitment to change is the most important thing, so you don't get swallowed up by your own sense of own importance or your own career. Because ultimately those are not the most important things... We're often in a rush to be published, be recognised, travel widely, be famous... be a professor. I think we sometimes lose the thing that brought us into the field in the first place, the passion to try to change the world around us. It's important to hold on to that.

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